

Pragati

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Towards liberal nationalism

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ALSO
K SUBRAHMANYAM ON GEOPOLITICS
ATTRACTING AFRICA
KATHMANDU & CONSENSUS
MEMORIES OF 1971
AFTER THE RESERVATIONS VERDICT

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Pragati

The Indian National Interest Review

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POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Liberals, culture and nationalism

An opportunity exists for a new politics

RAVIKIRAN S RAO



THERE IS a great deal of debate among liberals over whether nationalism is a help or hindrance to the liberal ideal. And within the nationalist camp, there is a schism over whether liberal nationalism or cultural nationalism is the choice to make. The latter debate misses the point. "Cultural nationalism" has a ring of tautology to it, because it is inevitable that nationalism has a cultural aspect to it. The former debate too can be resolved if one accepts that liberalism will not succeed without a culture of liberalism.

There are many benefits to sharing a culture. Culture, like language, eases communication. Whether it is the latest cricket news or Tirupati prasadam that is exchanged between two strangers from two ends of the country, in reality, what they are really exchanging are tokens of trustworthiness and camaraderie.

A shared culture makes it easier to have norms that act as the mode of default interaction between citizens. A trivial example of this is that no one who walks into a restaurant expects that he can walk away with the cutlery on which the food is served. If this shared understanding were not there, every human interaction would involve signing of complex contracts and would be mediated at the courtroom. The set of shared assumptions between people is, of course, what we know as "culture".

Now, the liberal counterpoint to these arguments would be that what unites us also divides us. While the news of Sachin Tendulkar's century

may bring closer those who are cricket fans, it leaves those who are not out in the cold. In a country as diverse as India, expecting cultural commonality to be the basis on which citizens build their society is just not practical. It is far better to have a liberal constitution and liberal laws to be the basis for nationhood, and leave culture as a private matter for citizens.

The problem with this argument is that respect for the constitution is a matter of culture. The idea that laws must be adhered to is a cultural norm. Liberals presumably want a dalit Indian in a remote village to have the same protection from police beatings that a middle-class Indian in the city has. This requires a law against the police beating up citizens. But a law by itself is not sufficient. It needs to be enforced, and enforcement of the law requires, not only a cultural norm that laws must be generally enforced, but also a cultural norm that says that all citizens should have the same protection of the law, just by virtue of being citizens. This last requires a feeling of community between India's citizens, and that leads us back to nationalism.

The liberal who accepts cultural nationalism in theory, however, is in for a rude shock when he encounters it in practice. The cultural in-group of the typical Indian is not his fellow Indians, but fellow members of his caste. What is worse, the cultural norms of self-governance among Indians are exceptionally weak. Democracy has not helped matters. One would have expected that the experience of democracy meant that Indians would come to view government as a part of their society rather than as an external entity, but that has not happened yet. Indians tend to think of laws as an

There is a case for an inclusive, non-elitist cultural nationalism that transcends, but does not displace other cultures.

imposition to be got around, not as something to be followed.

This, in a sense, strengthens the liberal case for limited government. Much of the case for strong government action depends on the potential of laws turning into social norms. But in a country where laws do not have such a force, it is hard to see what more laws will achieve. This also strengthens the case for local self-government. If laws made by a distant central government are causing alienation among citizens, then having laws made by local authorities, close to the ground seems like an obvious cure.

These structural solutions, however are not likely to be enough. There is still a case for an inclusive, non-elitist cultural nationalism that transcends, but does not displace other cultures.

The original contender for a national culture was the one that relied on the ideals of the freedom movement. It was a strong contender, with potent symbols and a stirring history. It fired up the imagination of the middle-class immediately after independence. But the awful performance of the Indian State has discredited this ideal. The legacy of the freedom movement was recklessly squandered.

As a challenge to this, we have Hindu nationalism. Most critics of Hindu nationalism tend to focus on the "Hindu" aspect, neglecting the fact that

the movement, at its core, is an attempt at nationalism, rather than an attempt to establish a Hindu theocracy. The attempt involves using the symbols of Hinduism to act as the basis of nationhood. If this were not so, there would be no other way to explain how Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, an atheist, could start the Hindu Mahasabha.

Unfortunately, this variant of cultural nationalism serves not to unite, but to divide the country. Instead of inclusive tolerance, it seeks to exclude large groups of people and seeks to implement highly sectarian policies. Worse still, the movement is not an assertion of a rising India, but more of a continuation of the same whine. Instead of the sight of a confident people taking charge of the country, what we see is a movement feeding further on the same politics of victimhood.

The challenge for liberals then, is to move beyond the sterility of policy responses and construct a secular nationalism using as raw material uncontroversial things that we all can share. Whether it is cricket, films, or festivals, the challenge is to construct an inclusive, liberal, cultural nationalism.

Ravikiran S Rao is editor of *Pragati* and blogs at *The Examined Life* (ravikiran.com).

POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Changing the broken wheel

The secular right must champion economic freedom

RAJ CHERUBAL

WATCHING VIDEOS of William F Buckley Jr's speeches, it is easy to understand why he has been called the father of modern conservatism and the scourge of liberalism (in the American sense of the term).

He brought joy, class and mischief to the conservative movement. He was a popular host of one of television's longest-running programs, *Firing Line*, a prolific writer of novels and articles, and of course, the founder of the highly influential magazine, *The National Review*.

With his playful, yet erudite ways he made conservatism fashionable. Conservatism had taken

a very defensive me-too approach after receiving a series of body blows—the Great Depression, the second world war, Roosevelt's New Deal and the embarrassment of the excesses of McCarthy's anti-communist campaigns. Mr Buckley provided the intellectual counter-punches that cleared the path for future conservative victories, including the Reagan and Republican revolutions.

The passage of the Civil Rights bill, opposed by the conservatives, demolished the Democrats in the South and made it a stronghold of the right for decades to come. The victories of Nixon and Reagan would not have been possible without this

shift. Across the United States, conservatism, thanks in large part to Mr Buckley, matured and was ready with an alternative by the time the left's follies came home to roost in the 70s and 80s. By then, "liberal" had become a term of abuse in America, and only moderate Democrats like Carter and Clinton could win elections.

In a roundabout way, he brought about the reform and moderation of the left. If this reform had not happened, it is questionable if the election victories of Bill Clinton and Tony Blair would have been possible after the stagnation and near intellectual bankruptcy of the left in the wake of the fall of communism. Mr Clinton and Mr Blair recaptured the middle by moving their parties to the right. They breathed the ideological and political oxygen that Mr Buckley and his acolytes had synthesised starting in the 50s and 60s.

As Don Martin wrote in the *New York Times*, "Mr Buckley wove the tapestry of what became the new American conservatism from libertarian writers like Max Eastman, free-market economists like Milton Friedman, traditionalist scholars like Russell Kirk and anti-Communist writers like Whittaker Chambers. He argued for a conservatism based on the national interest and a higher morality."

Mr Buckley with his unique style and quirks and his brand of conservatism—intellectual, optimistic and youthfully rebellious—did more. He helped rid the right of nuts and kooks and shed the image of conservatism as solely based on hate or belonging to the era of grumpy grandpas. He made the right mostly secular, cool and respectable.

In India, whence will such a force for the good come then?

Today, the left in India hides a crisis. Like the right in the United States starting in the 30s, it has been rendered historically irrelevant. Yet it must stay profoundly relevant, especially to maintain vibrancy of India's democracy. If the leftist move-

The secular right must strengthen the wheels of political and personal freedoms. A Buckleyian purge of peddlers of anachronistic and destructive economic ideology, may be inevitable, necessitated by history.

ment were a tricycle, the wheel of its economic policies has come apart with the collapse of communism worldwide, while the other two—advocacy of political and personal freedoms—are functioning, albeit in a creaky fashion. With one wheel missing, unable to come to terms with the loss, it is going in circles.

To confuse issues, the left and right are giant tents that cover vast expanses of political views. Anyone, from the unrepentant Stalinist and dreamer of liquidation of the capitalist classes to the defender of free speech, women's and dalit rights and even the pro-capitalist Communist, is shoved under the left tent. The tent of the right is equally crowded with capitalists, protectors of freedom of religion and speech, religious fanatics and hate mongers. The secular rightist—champion of thoughtful, nuanced, muscular and unapologetic secularism, free markets, free trade, rule of law, limited but effective government and individual rights will feel uncomfortable in this tent.

India is a nation with deep pockets of religious animosity and resultant resentments. The secular right has nothing to offer voters who crave sectarian competition and promise of a better afterlife. They cannot out-Hindutva or out-Jihad any practitioner of such politics. Add centuries-old caste prejudices to the equation and you get a fortress impenetrable to the secular right.

Since political inspiration and instructions for the religious right come from the worlds above and beyond, no logic of capitalism and compromise of secularism can provide a satisfying alternative. In fact, capitalism, like secularism, posits the acceptance of intermingling of races, colours and humans from across boundaries, all anathema to sectarians.

Such mingling is by and large welcome on the left, except when they are being disingenuous about globalisation as just being corporate driven. Ideas, institutions and even people are expected to cross oceans to break down old orders and barriers.

With the failure of an ideology based on collectivisation and class envy on the one hand, and the

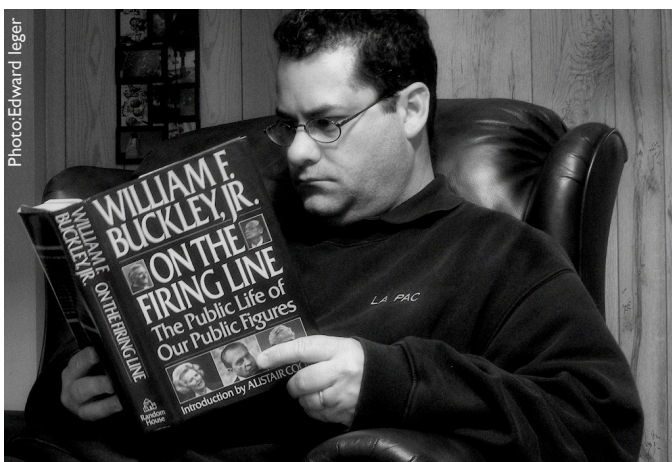


Photo: Edward Jeger

growing aspirations among the working and the socially oppressed classes on the other, capitalism finds acceptance among most, sometimes unconsciously, sometimes grudgingly. Also, there is growing acceptance among capitalists—sometimes defensive and overly penitent—to make capitalism more inclusive and distributive. Counselling patience and promises of trickle-down may no longer be unacceptable to either of these groups.

The metaphorical tricycle of the left is history's gift and invitation to the secular right. The secular right must help strengthen the wheels of political and personal freedoms. The Buckleyian purge on the left, of unsavoury peddlers of anachronistic and often destructive economic ideology, may be inevitable, necessitated by history.

But to actually use the tricycle, the secular right must replace the broken third wheel with that of economic freedom. It must create a politics that

marries the Marxist enthusiasm for grassroots globalisation and decentralisation with post crony-capitalist capitalism, based on rule of law, transparency and equality of opportunity to participate and compete. It must unite the left's egalitarian and undeniably romantic notions of equality of all with the morality of the markets and their ability to create wealth and demolish poverty and human misery. While giving communism a deep burial, capitalism is evolving. To ride the politics of future, secular right in India must make capitalism respectable for the poor and make capitalism for the poor, cool for the rest.

Raj Cherubal is coordinator of Janaagraha in Chennai. His blog is at *Liberation Raj* (liberationraj.org).

POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Towards "that heaven of freedom"

A free nation of free citizens

GAUTAM BASTIAN

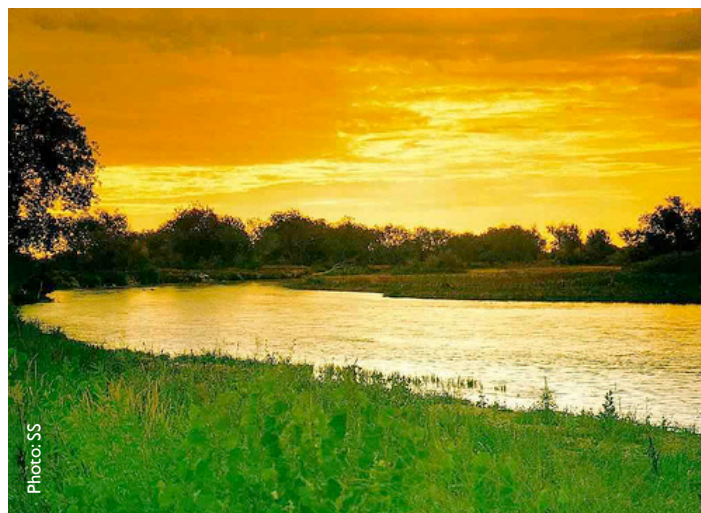
LIBERALISM AND nationalism have a common heritage in the 18th and 19th century when the ideas of Enlightenment found expression in the politics of Europe and later in India. Both ideas arose as a reaction to absolutism and complemented each other's rise. In Europe, Guiseppe Garibaldi fought many wars not only to unify his homeland Italy, but also to help achieve the national aspirations of other South American and European nations. In India the early nationalism of Raja Ram Mohan Roy and the Indian National Congress was founded on liberal ideas about equality before the law and the separation of powers.

The twentieth century saw the two ideas part ways. Internationally, the more virulent forms of nationalism blended with socialism and communism to unleash some of the worst tragedies of human history. Liberalism and democracy became the preserve of a few countries, many of whom managed to deliver prosperity to their citizens.

Taken to their extremes liberalism and nationalism are antithetical even inimical ideologies. There are however some shared values and synergies

which have seen liberals in India and abroad embrace nationalistic rhetoric and policies to achieve their goals.

It is interesting however that liberals do not agree about what this common ground is. Some propose that ethno-cultural nations are the only stable unit of political organisation. While others believe in the idea of civic nationalism or the prin-



ciple of voluntary association of citizens. You might find this confusing, contradictory or even hypocritical, but this only highlights the pragmatism of the liberal attitude.

In India, although we have a liberal democracy, the main political actors today all lay claim to nationalism. The early nationalism of the freedom movement was co-opted by Indira Gandhi's Congress Party. Nationalism came to mean a paternal state and blended perfectly with Mrs Gandhi's version of socialism. Nationalism, in this new sense, was used to justify an over-stretched state and became synonymous with a government that could not perform its core functions.

The failure and consequent discrediting of this version of nationalism gave way to the ugly, aggressive and sectarian Hindu nationalism of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). This nationalism defined itself not by a core, but by what it was not. It played the politics of victimisation and hate.

Caught between the two, the liberal nationalist was lost. While economic liberalism was adopted by the Hindu right, the liberal and secular nationalist had the choice between associating with upholders of hateful views and associating with a camp whose economic views were anathema to him.

Liberals value rule of law, property rights, tolerance and subsidiarity as the bases for society to negotiate progress. Each of these has important implications and together they form the basis of human rights and a substantial part of the inspiration behind the Indian constitution. These values have an inevitable tension with the nationalist ideal.

The principle of subsidiarity holds some promise for the prospect of marrying liberalism to nationalism, but only at first glance. Garibaldi the Italian nationalist, wanted every "nation" to have its own government. Garibaldi's nation, however, flies in the face of the concept of India. He defined it as a homogeneous community of people who would have a common identity and would be comfortable with self-rule.

Now, liberals are sympathetic to self-determination, but for individuals rather than nations. The principle of self-determination, when

The liberal vision is of a secular state that treats all of the nation's citizens without prejudice, respecting their individual rights and property.

applied to geographical entities, has led to highly illiberal results. It often becomes an excuse for autocrats or terrorists to legitimise their actions toward securing a personal fief rather than a homeland for their people.

If Garibaldi's definition of the nation is married to the liberal notion of subsidiarity, the resulting progeny will rebel against all the other principles of liberalism. It will not lead to rule of law. It will not protect minorities and will put paid to the virtue of tolerance. By increasing the number of national borders, it will result in greater protectionism and violations of individual rights.

Subsidiarity makes sense only in its pure form, with local governments having considerable autonomy, but constrained by a liberal national constitution.

The liberal vision is an Indian State that serves the citizens rather than being served by them. It is a secular state that treats all of the nation's citizens without prejudice, respecting their individual rights and property. It is a vehicle that facilitates independent citizens to achieve their full potential. One simple way of envisioning the liberal state is to see it restricting itself to bare minimum functions. Such a state will also be less susceptible to capture by special interests.

The liberal vision of India is of a free nation of free citizens. This neither requires nor denies the need for a myth to build a cohesive basis for the nation. It does, however, look beyond traditional group identities and recognises the diverse individuals who constitute India.

Gautam Bastian is national co-ordinator of the Liberal Youth Forum of India.

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RESERVATIONS

Out of court

Carry on the battle, but respect the Court's verdict

ROHIT PRADHAN, SHASHI SHEKHAR & MUKUL G ASHER

The Supreme Court cannot fight the battle for the people of India

ROHIT PRADHAN: In a judgement which was not completely unexpected, the Supreme Court has upheld reservations for other backward classes (OBCs) in central educational institutions. The five-judge bench, in four different but concurring verdicts held that:

- The 93rd amendment to the constitution does not violate the basic structure of the constitution.
- The 'creamy layer' must be excluded from the ambit of reservations as caste cannot be the sole criterion for determining backwardness.
- Reservations should not continue in perpetuity and the government may review their effectiveness every five years (Justice Arijit Pasayat) or ten years (Chief Justice K G Balakrishnan).
- Excluding minority institutions from the purview of the reservations is not incorrect.

The Court refused to offer an opinion on extending reservations to private institutions as none of these universities had challenged the impugned amendment. But Justice Dalveer Bhandari noted that reservations in private institutions is liable to be held unconstitutional.

The Court has refused to be involved in the details of the reservation policy as that is the executive's prerogative. Therefore, it rejected the petitioner's argument that lack of data or a definitive list of OBCs by itself vitiated the government's decision to effect reservations. Chief Justice Balakrishnan specifically rejected the "strict scrutiny

test" or the "suspect legislation test". However, Justice Pasayat allowed for the inclusion or exclusion of a specific caste to be challenged in the court.

The implications of the court judgement are clear enough. First, the policy of reservations would continue and may be further expanded to the private sector. Second, the government is likely to respect only those parts of the judgements which are political expedient: the suggestion for a five year review process will be ignored and attempts would be made to subvert the creamy layer criterion. Third, faced with unanimous political opinion, the Court is not likely to risk a confrontation. An adverse judgement would have been overturned by the parliament through another constitutional amendment. The Court has recognised this political reality.

The verdict reaffirms the view that the battle against the culture of entitlement can only be a political battle. It must be fought in the streets of India with a very limited role for judicial challenges.

The war on social justice is not lost

SHASHI SHEKHAR: While this verdict has been seen as a setback by many, it is actually a blessing in disguise. Consider.

First, a nasty constitutional crisis between the Supreme Court and Parliament was avoided

Second, linking reservations to caste-based criteria prevented the imposition of reservations for perpetuity. Why? Because if economic criteria were to be the basis for reservations then we would be



locked into reservations for eternity because there will always be economic disparity. On the other hand the premise of caste-based reservations is the “effect of past discrimination on current participation”.

This, however, will fade with time as it already has to a large extent. The five-year (or ten-year) review cycle thus provides an exit route for the reservations policy. It can be objectively shown that cycle after cycle the “effects of past discrimination” have diminished, current participation levels improved, and hence, we can go down the path of shrinking reservations.

Third, the ‘creamy layer’ factor is yet another way to force the debate on the diminishing effects of past discrimination. Let politicians debate and come up with this definition. The courts should only judge the constitutionality of any definition the political class comes up with. Ultimately it will force the issue on what is discrimination, who is discriminated against and how come the well-to-do can still claim to be suffering the effects of past discrimination.

The war on social justice is not lost. The Supreme Court’s verdict should be taken as a battle that ended in a draw. Let us not forget that the issue of reservations is political and not legal. The war is political. That war can only be won when more OBC leaders show the courage and conviction—like Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi—to defy the conventional wisdom on identity politics to chart a different course.

Respect the verdict in letter and spirit

MUKUL G ASHER: The verdict balances society’s need for competence and employable graduates with the provision of educational access to the OBCs.

The judgement of the Supreme Court (should) be respected in both letter and spirit. Those who are now trying to subvert the letter and spirit of the verdict should receive severe social and political disapproval.

India’s national interests are best served by ordering our society around equality, merit and a quest for excellence. The Supreme Court’s judgement should not be viewed as an end in itself, but rather as an intermediate step towards this goal.

For too long, the education policies have neglected the supply side of education in providing the much needed infrastructure; addressing rigidities in the educational institutions and regulations; and improving the quality of teachers and researchers at all levels of the education system.

The main constraints are not monetary resources, but what Bimal Jalan has termed the “rul-

India’s national interests are best served by ordering our society around equality, merit and a quest for excellence. The verdict is an intermediate step towards this goal.

ing mindset,” which does not adequately respect or respond to the needs of ordinary people in a way that improves the quality of life and reduces costs of everyday living.

Uncertainties generated by current higher education policies at the time of admission reflect incompetence of the policy-makers and built-in rigidities in expanding supply of education.

The neglect of primary education—evidenced by a large number of schools with no school building, no blackboard, and no electricity; high student to teacher ratios (in many cases exceeding 100 students per teacher); and single teacher schools—has already cost the country, particularly the low income households, dear in accessing economic opportunities and upward socio-economic mobility. Such neglect is also evident at secondary and higher levels of education.

Focusing the energies of policy-makers on improving this state of affairs will do far more for the *aam aadmi* than doggedly pursuing reservations for ever widening section of population.

The government has been asked to prepare and periodically update the list of economically and socially backward classes who should be included in the list of beneficiaries.

It is astonishing that until now no such list of intended and actual beneficiaries has been compiled and subjected to public scrutiny. The Right to Information Act should be vigorously applied to ensure that such a list is not only prepared but also subjected to public scrutiny and accountability.

Rohit Pradhan and Shashi Shekhar are resident commentators. Mukul G Asher is professor of public policy at the National University of Singapore.

IISS-Citi India Global Forum

THE LONDON-BASED International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) held its inaugural conference on 'India as a Rising Great Power' in New Delhi last month. A couple of interesting issues were:

"The question is whether India's dynamism of economic growth is matched by equivalent dynamism in political extroversion"

"Both India and China believe the next century is theirs. Can they both be right?"

Climate Change and National Security



THE INDIAN National Interest (INI) community launched its policy brief series with Nitin Pai's study of the impact of climate change on existing conflicts in the subcontinent.

It interposes the main climate change mechanisms—glacial melting, rising sea levels and extreme weather—with conflicts in the region and argues that these could lead to new conflicts. Military preparedness would need to take into account a

range of strategic scenarios from supporting international co-operation, to managing a "hot peace", to new wars.

ALSO INDIA's Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA) organised a workshop on climate change on April 16th, 2008 to "understand the geopolitical dimensions of climate change and implications for India"

"No clear consensus emerged on what issues needed to be securitised or whether securitising the issue was the right approach. It was realised that one needs to understand the process and not blindly link issues to only climate change.

However there was consensus that the following tasks were necessary: Studies to refine negotiation strategies need to consolidate studies on climate change (national action plan as being attempted by Government of India is one that is awaited), migrants, water resources related studies and most importantly resources and environmental stresses related issues. It was also felt that the human security dimensions of climate change should also be examined."

India-Iran relations

IN A policy brief published by Harvard's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Ronak Desai and Xenia Dormandy examine the growing warmth in the Indo-Iranian relationship from the American point of view.

It describes the energy security dimension to strategic ties and concludes that "New Delhi is unlikely to totally sacrifice its

energy and strategic interests with Tehran for its relationship with Washington". Thus, "the United States should also adopt a more nuanced foreign policy towards India."

To The Brink: Operation Parakram

ALEX STOLAR of the Stimson Center, has published a study of the ten-month stand-off between India and Pakistan triggered by an attack on the Indian Parliament by Islamic extremists in December 2001.

It includes interviews with two former members of India's Cabinet Committee on Security, Brajesh Mishra and Jaswant Singh, as well as with other senior Indian national security officials who were in office during the confrontation.

It draws the following conclusions :

- Nuclear weapons might help stabilise an adversarial relationship but they certainly do not prevent severe crises that can lead to conflict.

- While notions of "limited" war are a staple of the deterrence literature, carrying out a limited military action under the nuclear umbrella entails substantial risks. Statesmen and generals considering launching a "limited war" would have to consider what factors would keep a limited military action limited, and what factors would cause a limited military action to escalate.

- Message management during a crisis is both essential and difficult. Disciplined message management can help prevent unintended escalation during a crisis. National leaders, however, must convey information to multiple

domestic and international audiences during a crisis, and doing so effectively and precisely is extraordinarily challenging.

- Facilitating inter-agency co-operation is a vital but complicated task for heads of state and principals in the midst of a crisis. Even during the best of times, co-ordinating complex government bureaucracies in the formulation and implementation of policy is difficult. Periods of crisis strain government bureaucracies at a time when nimble and co-ordinated responses to complex challenges are most needed.

Trade across the Line of Control

D SUBA CHANDRAN of the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies (IPCS) argues that cross LoC trade is clearly in India's interests.

He concludes that while it will be an uphill struggle to convince Pakistan of a Nathu La like model (that opened border trade between India and China) because the question is not procedural but political. Despite the thaw in relations, Pakistan has not allowed business delegations from Pakistan-occupied Kashmir to meet their counterparts in Jammu & Kashmir. He proposes that such meetings be held at neutral venues.

The brief points out that patience is advisable in the process towards freeing up cross-LoC trade if the negotiations are purposeful.

We have made changes to the FILTER

This section will now include regular surveys of studies, workshops and analysis coming out of think tanks. To alert us, email us at pragati@nationalinterest.in

Compiled by Vijay Vikram, a student at the School of International Relations at the University of St. Andrews.



INTERVIEW

The new currency of power

A discussion on strategic affairs with K Subrahmanyam

NITIN PAI & ARUNA URS

K SUBRAHMANYAM'S "passion for national interests," P R Kumaraswamy writes in the preface to *Security Beyond Survival*, "never blinds him to India's follies. The respect he commands among students of national security is primarily a reflection of his own 'competence, knowledge and originality in thinking', to borrow his own words albeit in a different context. In his myriad of roles as an officer in the Indian Administrative Service, head of a strategic think tank, media commentator, and a prolific writer, he has always exceeded the standards set by his peers." Last month, *Pragati* sat down with Mr Subrahmanyam for a wide ranging conversation on the geopolitics of the 21st century, the role of nuclear weapons, India's national interest, military modernisation and much more.

Geopolitical strategy

Many Western strategists contend that America's unipolar moment is giving way to multi-polarity. But you have argued that the world became multi-polar with the collapse of Soviet Union. Recently, Parag Khanna put

forward a thesis arguing that US power is on the decline and that the EU and China will be the new 'poles'. How do you see the future shaping up?

It depends upon the time frame: if you are perhaps talking about next 15 years, Parag Khanna has a point. If you take the 30-40 years, then the Japanese, Europeans, Chinese and Russians are all going to age. The proportion of working population to non-working population becomes unfavourable. This automatically will lead to certain amount of decline. These countries then have to rely on migrants. Europeans might get more migrants from the southern Mediterranean; Japan perhaps will welcome some from the Philippines. The Chinese are going to face a major problem, as they will be an ageing society with skewed sex ratio. Russia will grapple with the growth of its Islamic population and decline in the white Russian population.

The only two countries that will be relatively young will be America and India. America will remain young because of immigration. India will

India has to leverage this situation and change the US-EU-China triangle into a rectangle. Until then it is in our interest to help America to sustain its pre-eminence.

be still behind the ageing curve by about 50 years. All projections are set to change under these circumstances.

During the next two decades, Americans will be looking to augment their brain resources to compete with China and the EU. India is the natural reservoir for them. This will enhance India-the US relationship. We don't have any clash of national interest with the Americans. There are some issues that usually arise because of America's dealings with third parties such as Pakistan. But at a time when the government-to-government relationship was not good, we still saw about two million Indians settling in America. If things improve, this trend will get stronger.

India has to leverage this situation and change the US-EU-China triangle into a rectangle. Until then it is in our interest to help America to sustain its pre-eminence. After all, in a three-person game, If America is at Number One, China is at Number Two and we are lower down, it is in our best interest to ensure that it is America that remains Number One.

Does the Indian government realise the need to transform its foreign policy in the light of the sharp changes in India's geopolitical status over the last two decades? Is a conscious rethink necessary or will it just happen by itself.

We have not fully thought through the notion of our foreign policy reflecting our rising status. I have said that knowledge is the currency of power in this century—that is my own perspective. The task force on global strategic developments that I headed also points out the same. However, the final report is yet to be released by the government. These ideas are still under development and are yet to be accepted by significant number of scholars within the country. These changes will take place over a period of time and we can very well say that we are in an initial stage of a very long process.

Nuclear Weapons

Yes, you have argued that warheads and missiles are not the currency of power in the 21st century; rather it

is knowledge. But strategic weapons are responsible for stability: in a sense, aren't they international public goods funded by taxpayers of India, China, US and others that are enjoyed by the rest of world?

Many people thought that these were public goods and perhaps many continue to think so. This is a very paradoxical situation. I used to explain to people that I myself represent that paradox. I have been convinced for a long time that a nuclear war cannot be fought. In conventional warfare, the war takes place in a limited space and various key decisions are taken outside that limited space. If a nuclear war is unleashed, there is no space outside. Where and how will one take a decision to terminate this war?

The Americans used to tell me that they have thought through this problem and they claimed to have found a solution, till of course the early 80s, when scholars like Bruce Blair started asking questions about command and control in a nuclear war. Then in 2005, Robert McNamara confessed that he too had been holding on to the same position ever since he was defence secretary (1961-68) but he could not articulate it as this stance went against the entire NATO policy. In a sense, there is a charade about it in the whole world. Kissinger advocated the use of tactical nuclear weapons in his PhD thesis. He, along with a number of former senior American officials, is now pleading that the world should eliminate nuclear weapons.

While I am convinced that a nuclear war is un-fightable, as long as the next person is not convinced about it, I have to be cautious. The only way to persuade others is for us to have a weapon ourselves. When I formulated India's nuclear doctrine, many questioned the need for one as none of the five nuclear powers had a doctrine. I believed that we owed an explanation to the people of India and the world as for a long period of time we had considered nuclear weapons as immoral and illegitimate. The doctrine says: we still consider nuclear war cannot be fought and use of nuclear weapons is illegitimate and therefore the "no first-use" policy.

But the NATO's doctrine seems to be still living in 1970s.

True, in 1999 when the NATO doctrine was being discussed, the Germans and the Canadians pleaded to include no first-use but the rest of them refused.

But you cannot eliminate a weapon that is deemed to be legitimate. The first step towards elimination is to delegitimise the weapons. The first way of delegitimising is to acknowledge the possession of weapon for deterrence but not for

warfare, that is, a no first-use policy. The 1925 Geneva Protocol against chemical weapons did not prohibit possession, it only prohibited the use, or rather, first use. It was only in 1993, 68 years after the protocol was signed, that all countries agreed to eliminate these weapons. Therefore the route to elimination of nuclear weapons is through delegitimisation and it starts with "no-first use".

National Interest

How would you define India's 'national interest'?

First and foremost, the state has to ensure 9-10 percent economic growth. Secondly, it has to ensure that poverty is alleviated and eliminated. Finally, to achieve these two, we need good and effective governance. All these factors are symbiotically related and I would consider these as the most important components of national interest. Once we have achieved this, the Indian entrepreneurship will ensure India's success.

Doesn't this interpretation contradict Morgenthau's. Modern Western Realists define the national interest as the survival and security of the state.

Morgenthau was writing about developed nations. I do not think he was even conscious of poverty as an issue. The basic principles of what he wrote are quite good but it needs to be revised under present circumstances. He was writing at a time where forcibly grabbing territory as well as resources was a major factor in the calculations of nations.

The Marxists criticise the notion of the 'national interest', arguing that it is merely an euphemism or proxy for the interests of the ruling class.

Meaningless—Marxism itself was hijacked by apparatchiks resulting in a Marxist state where the best cloth from Europe was procured for politburo members and suits were made by the best tailors. This was considered a non-elitist policy. Mao Zedong imported blue films and it was non-elitist. The problem is that once people are appointed to positions of power, whatever has to be done is done through them. Whether they have the people's interest in mind while taking decisions depends on their values and beliefs regardless of whether it is a Marxist or a non-Marxist state. There is no mechanism by which foreign policies will be made by the masses. Even in democracies, a party can publish its foreign policy manifesto but there is no way of ensuring its implementation.

Lessons from national experience

Looking back over the decades, what would you say were the best and worst moments?

The first step towards elimination is to delegitimise the weapons. The first way of delegitimising is to acknowledge they are for deterrence and not for warfare.

One of the best moments was on 16th December 1971, when we achieved success in Bangladesh and the other has to be split into two—18th May 1974 and 11th May 1998, when we conducted nuclear tests.

One of the worst moments was on 18th November 1962. I was then working in the defence ministry, when I came to know that Prime Minister Nehru had written to President Kennedy asking for American aircraft to operate from India soil against the Chinese. This was when India itself had not even used its own air force. The imposition of emergency on 25th of June 1975 was the second worst moment.

What were the learning points from 1962?

It is a learning point in a big sense. We had an army whose leadership was immature as they had been promoted too rapidly. They were incapable of handling such situations. This was true not only of military but also of the diplomatic community and to some extent it was true of politicians including Jawaharlal Nehru. He was persuaded that it would be either a full-scale war in which case other major nations were expected to support India or that it would remain as patrol clashes. That the Chinese could calibrate the operation so very carefully, mainly to humiliate him, and then withdraw, was something that did not occur to him. It was a very masterful strategy of the Chinese who took full advantage of Cuban missile crisis.

Have the lessons been learnt?

No. Take the liberation of Bangladesh as a case study. Pakistan held free and fair election in December of 1970 under a mistaken assumption that nobody would win a clear majority and the army would still be able to manipulate the country. I was convinced that the army would not hand over power and that we had to be prepared for problems. Then came the hijacking of the Indian aircraft that was blown up in Lahore after which Pakistani planes were banned from Indian airspace. The Pakistanis started building up troops in Bangladesh and the ships were going via Colombo. Everybody knew about it. But we didn't do

anything to warn our armed forces to be ready till 25th March 1971 when Pakistanis began the crack down (See page 21). When asked to intervene on 30th March, the Indian army requested for more time. When they got the time that they needed, they did the job beautifully well. But we did not anticipate this eventuality.

Let us take Kargil as another example. In the Kargil committee report, we have said that the Cabinet Committee on Security should have a regular intelligence briefing by the Chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee. But the government has not accepted this. There is no sensitivity to intelligence in India. The top decision-makers do not get themselves briefed on the state of affairs. They only expect to get an update if something happens. This attitude still persists and this is a major weakness.

The whole attitude to intelligence needs to change. Professor Manohar Lal Sondhi used to say that since I was the chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee, I should have nothing to do with academics! During the second world war, all the intellectuals were in intelligence. American professors used to encourage students to join the intelligence community. Even today, I see many CIA advertisements in university campuses across America.

But when I ask people in Jawaharlal Nehru University to consider a career in intelligence, they simply refuse. Many consider it unethical.

Military modernisation

In our recent issues, Pragati has focused on the modernisation of India's armed forces. It is clear that a critical aspect of national security is suffering from apathy, and neglect. And procurement scandals—which get a lot of media attention—appear to be the tip of the metaphorical iceberg. Is there a way out of the mess?

Modernisation is a complex process. I have said in the Kargil committee report that we have not modernised decision-making process ever since Lord Ismay prescribed it in 1947. Our military command and control have not changed since the second world war. While we are talking about buying modern equipment, the force structure and philosophy go back to the Rommel's desert campaign and Mountbatten's South-east Asia Command. Nobody has done anything about it.

Now there is talk about the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) model. It pains me to hear this. The British adopted the CDS system, as they would never fight a war on their own. CDS is not an institution for us. Ours should be the Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staffs and theatre commands below him.

Apart from that, the entire arms industry is now getting concentrated. The European armament industry is being brought over by the Americans. Only the Russian armament industry is independent of that. There is no way that we will be able to produce everything for ourselves. Given the threats we face, we have to think strategically of what we should buy and what we should develop. We can't say we are going to buy 126 aircraft and this will not affect our future aircraft development philosophy. It is going to have a very serious impact. Instead of buying defence equipment *ad hoc*, on the basis of what is the best available price, we should bear our long-term strategic vision in mind and start expanding the capacity judiciously.

The whole problem of procurement is the refusal of the country to accept that the issue is of political corruption. However perfect the procedures are, the corruption takes place outside South Block. Tinkering with procedures will not end corruption. The solution might lie with campaign finance reforms.

Isn't military bureaucracy, like any other bureaucracy, status quoist and resistant to modernisation?

This raises another point. A civil service recruit becomes a district magistrate in six years and is in charge of a district of a million people but an army recruit gets independent charge only after 18 years of service. Why should it take 18 years for an army officer to progress to that level? During the second world war, a man with five years experience was leading a battalion into battle. With eight years of experience, one would command a brigade. This anomaly has been grossly overlooked.

Isn't there such information asymmetry about these issues, the public doesn't even know what questions to ask and politicians have their own agenda? What is the way out?

It is going to be difficult. At least 30 or 40 years ago, there was time and inclination among our members of parliament to ask questions and discuss these types of issues. Today very little serious business is done in parliament. It has become a political arena for confrontation among different political parties. Modernisation does not begin with procurement of latest equipment. Before that we have to think through the structure, organisation and methods of functioning. Equipment should come last in the order of priority.

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CHINA

Use the Tibet card

To settle the India-China border dispute

ZORAWAR DAULET SINGH



Photo: Bart Pogoda

RECENTLY, A few Indian commentators have renewed calls for New Delhi to re-evaluate its China policy, and the position to accorded to Tibet in interactions with Beijing. At the heart of these arguments is that India's China policy has been "tepid", "defensive", and "excessively cautious", especially when the subject has been Tibet. They argue that it is imperative for New Delhi to employ counter-pressure *vis-à-vis* Beijing, and Tibet provides that much needed leverage.

To begin with, New Delhi will need to identify and link its Tibetan leverage toward some well-defined Chinese behaviour that it seeks to change, and ensure that this is efficiently communicated to Beijing, lest the entire strategy leads to a further deterioration of the security dilemma on the Himalayan frontiers.

Realists will appreciate that India currently does not possess a relative advantage in offensive military capabilities to replay British India's policy that sought to reconcile the symbolism of China's "suzerainty" over Tibet while simultaneously buttressing Tibetan autonomy under the cover of British power. A coercive strategy would require India having to bandwagon with an outside big power. Given the cold war history of covert Western activity in the Himalayas, this is an extremely dangerous proposition and likely to escalate into armed

conflict. Ashok Malik, a perspicacious newspaper columnist, states it bluntly: "India is not a Central Asian frontline state, has limited stakes in Tibet, and, as a conservative regional power, cannot easily welcome adventurist scenario-building in its near neighbourhood." Yet, as Brahma Chellaney, a professor of strategic affairs at the Centre for Policy Research, notes: "between appeasement and confrontation lie a hundred different options." It is vital then that while playing the "Tibet card", India avoids being perceived by Beijing as an adjunct or partner in US security

policies. India's new Tibet policy will have to be based on a non-coercive strategy that seeks to play on Beijing's sensitivity toward its international image and its quest to cultivate the perception of China as a responsible *status quo* actor. In this context, "legitimacy" of China's ownership of Tibet is perhaps more important than the number of Peoples Liberation Army divisions securing the plateau.

But where does India derive its Tibetan leverage from?

Very simply, the presence of the Dalai Lama and 120,000 Tibetans on Indian soil provides New Delhi with a unique (if latent) influence on the affairs in Tibet. It is also worth noting that India's so-called "defensive" posture and policy on Tibet has largely been the result of New Delhi's attempts to reassure Beijing that India will neither encourage nor condone any Tibetan political activity on Indian soil. Such a cautious attitude got further entrenched after the armed conflict of 1962, which itself partially had its origins in the first Tibetan revolt of March 1959 that subsequently led to the flight of the Dalai Lama and Tibetan refugees to India.

Over the years, however, India in its quest for confidence-building and the pursuit of stable rela-

tions with China, has been unwilling to adjust its unilateral acquiescence of 1954, which was the first time India acknowledged the sovereignty of China over an “autonomous Tibet”. In fact, India’s policy of unilaterally placating China has over the decades led to a paradoxical situation: the presence of the Dalai Lama and his fellow émigrés on Indian soil has somehow become a source of weakness—a burden—in India’s China policy. Beijing has astutely perpetuated such a psychological Indian condition, largely by its policy of repeatedly seeking India’s reiteration of its 1954 position and generously receiving it by a variety of political dispensations in New Delhi.

Moreover, New Delhi seems to have convinced itself that Indian actions somehow contributed to the Tibetan problem. But as Nikita Khrushchev

A pragmatic China policy does not preclude linking Tibet with the resolution of the overall border dispute.

reminded Mao Zedong in an October 1959 encounter, “If you allow him (Dalai Lama) an opportunity to flee to India, then what has Nehru to do with it? We believe that the events in Tibet are the fault of the Communist Party of China, not Nehru’s fault”. In a similar vein, John Garver, a noted China scholar, in a recent analysis of Beijing’s decision to go to war with India in 1962 argues: “India became the main object of Chinese projection of responsibility for the difficulties that Chinese rule encountered, and in fact Chinese themselves created, in Tibet circa 1959”. Such a Chinese threat perception (or misperception) continues to this day.

The net result—a potential Indian advantage *vis-à-vis* Tibet has been converted into a liability that no policy-maker in New Delhi has been able or willing to adjust since India’s fatal concession to China in the 1954 Panchsheel Treaty. It is this ab-

surd situation that some contrarian voices in New Delhi’s strategic community are seeking to adjust—that while New Delhi has been consistent in its reiteration of Beijing’s ownership of Tibet, it has received no reciprocal gains from China.

And this brings to the fore perhaps the most vital question. What does India propose to use its so-called Tibetan leverage for? Surely not for moral posturing, which some among the civil-political elite seem to relish.

India can link a final and unequivocal legitimisation of China’s sovereignty over Tibet to a settlement of border dispute. The logic of Chinese claims to some of the disputed pockets of territory south of the 1914 line stem entirely from historical Tibetan claims. Thus, the centrality of Tibet in the border dispute cannot be wished away.

Even more specifically, India could use the Tibet ‘card’ to the Tawang tract in Arunachal Pradesh, arguably the most contentious pocket in the eastern sector of the overall border dispute, and a strategically vital location from an Indian security perspective.

Finally, such a strategy does not in any way imply a reversal of India’s bipartisan China policy, which since the late 1980s has sought to de-couple the border impasse with progress on other normal inter-state fronts, particularly in the economic sphere. This pragmatic China policy, however, does not preclude linking Tibet with the resolution of the overall border dispute.

To be sure, such a Kautilyan strategy would require a firm, patient and nimble foreign policy machine that enables New Delhi to signal its intentions to China. Interestingly, the joint communiqué from the January 2008 Sino-Indian summit in Beijing did not include a reference to Tibet.

India must ensure that it has the institutional capability and a sustained political will to employ the “Tibet card” as part of a coherent strategy for resolving the otherwise intractable border dispute with China.

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NEPAL

Consensus must endure

Maoists have the upper hand in the construction of the republic

DINESH WAGLE

FOR SOME in Nepal, this is the time to reflect upon the past and see what really went wrong. For others, it is the time to get ready to face the challenges of the days ahead.

Two of the largest political parties—Prime Minister Koirala's Nepali Congress and the moderate Communist Party of Nepal—United Marxist Leninist (CPN-UML)—are reviewing their humiliating and unexpected defeat in the April 10 polls. The surprisingly victorious CPN (Maoist)—former rebels who signed a peace agreement in 2006 to halt the decade-long insurgency—is preparing itself to assume the leadership of the next government. In the final tally, the Maoists have garnered 220 out of 575 seats that were up for grabs. A further 26 seats of the 601-seat Constituent Assembly will be filled by the prime minister's appointees, with the consensus of the ruling parties.

Though it emerged as the largest party in the assembly, the CPN(Maoist) do not have the majority to form the government on its own. There is also another hurdle: according to the interim constitution currently in force, the prime minister—who also serves as the acting head of state—can only be replaced by two-thirds majority in the assembly. Thus if a Maoist leader becomes the prime minister, the electoral arithmetic will make it impossible to replace him.

This is causing a degree of unease among those outside the Maoist camp, especially the Nepali Congress, and foreign powers like the United States. Thus the question: what if a coalition of non-Maoist parties in the assembly form the government?

In an op-ed article titled "Don't Subvert Mandate", Ameet Dhakal, news editor of the *Kathmandu Post* argues that it is "foolish to think that constitutional technicalities can be manipulated to get around the popular mandate. The Maoists should be given the opportunity not only to lead the government but to lead a sole government. (sic)"

There is also an immense pressure within the Nepali Congress not to take part in the government, let alone lead it.

Ordinary Nepalis, however, already think that the Maoists are going to lead the government regardless of the constitutional technicalities. The most important question on people's minds right now is: what might the Maoists do after that? Many hope that they will provide lasting peace and take Nepali society ahead on the road of prosperity, through what Pushpa Kumar Dahal (or "Prachanda" as he is more popularly known) calls an "economic miracle". But others are deeply sceptical about the rebels—who still have their own armed militia—being at the helm of the power in Kathmandu.

Will there be a Nepali cultural revolution? A great leap forward? These are some of the questions that Maoists themselves are trying very hard to address. But they have shown no sign of such extremism. Instead, they have made it clear time and again that they are actually for a mixed economy that encourages public-private partnership. Though they frown at the mere utterance of Deng Xiaoping's name, many people believe that the Maoists would like to follow Deng's path in Nepal. Mr Dahal has said in many interviews and public speeches that his party would do everything to attract foreign investment, foster national investment and encourage capitalists to earn profit. "We know what liberalisation and privatisation are" he said after participating in an UN-coordinated interaction with foreign donors in Kathmandu in late-April, "we are for a mixed and transitional economy." This meeting followed a similar interaction of top Maoist leaders with representatives of the Nepali business community a week earlier.

The Maoist leadership is attempting to reassure three constituencies at the same time: first, the national non-Maoist forces that received almost 70 percent of the votes in the recent elections; second, the Nepali business community which was both terrorised during the insurgency and continues to face various challenges from Maoist-affiliated trade unions; and finally, the international community that remains deeply sceptical about the Maoists' plans.

India has already declared that it is eager to work with the new government regardless of the party that leads it. In fact, Shiv Shankar Mukherjee, the Indian ambassador, (since replaced by Rakesh Sood) was the first foreign diplomat to call on Mr Dahal and congratulate him on the victory.

The Maoists have made it clear that they want the 1950 India-Nepal treaty of friendship—that gives India a say in Nepal's internal matters like arms imports from third countries—to be scrapped.

Deep anti-India sentiments abound among the Nepali public because issues like reports of border encroachment by the Indian side and, recently, the ban on clinker exports to Nepal. Many cement factories are on the verge of closure because of the ban that, according to Mr Mukherjee, India imposed to combat domestic inflation. After it emerged that cement factories were being closed in different parts of Nepal, Mr Mukherjee promised to request the Indian government “to make special provision for Nepal” on this issue.

The interim constitution requires the constituent assembly to pass articles of the new constitution with a two-thirds majority. This means that no party can do it alone. The parties have to work for consensus.

Then there is the United States that continues to place the Maoists in its official list of terrorist organisations. But this might change soon. Nancy Powell, the US ambassador, was present in the UN co-ordinated donor's interaction with the Maoist leadership. "She didn't speak," Mr Dahal replied when asked by a reporter if Ms Powell had called him a terrorist in the meeting. "She didn't say any negative thing, she didn't say any positive thing. She just listened. We hope after this interaction America will reconsider its policy and create a favourable environment. We are very much eager to establish diplomatic relations with the United States and get their help to build a new Nepal."

As for the two of the largest parties, the question is what they will do in the coming days.

To join or not to join the Maoist-led government is the biggest dilemma the parties face at this time. There is overwhelming pressure on both parties not to join the government. To yield means to shy away from the culture of consensus-based politics

that has been the driving factor in the last two years. With the success of historic April revolution in which Maoists and an alliance of seven political parties (SPA) came together through a 12-point agreement, and the successful signing of the peace agreement, political parties have shown that they can work together when needed. Many leaders insist that such mutual understanding and politics of consensus is needed when the nation starts writing constitution in the coming weeks.

Shankar Pokharel, a UML leader who pulled his party out of the interim government this month echoed this perspective. "We can work with the Maoists in drafting the constitution," he said. "But we can't stay in the government because the people's mandate doesn't allow us."

New political forces have emerged in the Terai, the southern plains bordering India. The Maoists will have to work with them to secure the smooth writing of the constitution. The Madhesi Peoples' Rights Forum (MPRF), the biggest regional party in the Terai, has had a bitter relationship with the Maoists in the past. But both parties have said that they must forget the past to come together in future.

An important issue involves doing away with the monarchy and sending King Gyanendra out of the Narayanhiti Palace to his personal Nirmal Niwas. The first meeting of the constituent assembly will have to enact the decision taken earlier by the political parties to turn Nepal into a republic. The Maoists have indicated that they are working for the 'graceful exit' of the monarch before the first sitting to avoid further conflict. But Maoists leaders have rejected proposals to leave the king as a 'cultural monarch' and have insisted that there is no question of continuing with the king in any form.

But the most important task in the coming days, however, is to draft a new constitution for a federal Nepal. The interim constitution requires the constituent assembly to pass articles of the new constitution with a two-thirds majority. This means that no party can do it alone. The parties have to come together, hammer out agreements and work for consensus. The constituent assembly will have to address some thorny issues with regard to the structure of the federation. Will it be caste and ethnicity based? Or will it be based on geography? The parties have differing views on the big questions. There is no alternative other than to strive for consensus.

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AFRICA

Bottom-up dynamics

What attracts Africa to India and how it can be strengthened

SUSHANT K SINGH

THE FIRST India-Africa Forum summit was held at New Delhi earlier this month. There were several other events organised on the sidelines of the summit: a business conclave, the first ever India-Africa editor's conference, a seminar of intellectuals on the India-Africa partnership in the 21st century, joint performances by Indian and African cultural troupes and a programme for youth and women.

The summit, which was a culmination of several levels of dialogue, is already being considered a success in many quarters. It is hoped that these events will create an enabling environment for upgrading economic co-operation between India and the countries of Africa.

The events had their share of coverage in the mainstream media—Indian, African and Western. However, the landmark event deserves much wider appreciation and analysis than provided by the perfunctory news reports covering the events.

On one hand, Western analysts tend to see all major Indian initiatives on Africa—including this summit—through the prism of competition between the burgeoning economies of India and China. On the other hand, many African commentators have warned their own leaders about India's intentions in what they have disparagingly labelled as the "second scramble for Africa".

The key drivers for this summit and other Indian initiatives on Africa go beyond the traditional factors raised by most analysts. It is not limited to containing or matching Chinese economic interests in Africa or answering India's impending quest for energy security. Unlike China, India has had a historical relationship with the African continent for centuries, driven by trade with the eastern and southern coasts of Africa. The presence of a large Indian diaspora in Africa for over two centuries also provides India with a unique advantage over its Asian neighbour. India's quest for energy in Africa is not tightly coupled with the energy security policy; rather, it is part of its bid to diversify energy sources.

So what was the rationale for the India-Africa summit, if not mimicking the China-Africa summit

last year? It is an obvious indicator of the renewed drive in the India-Africa story. Current global equations and recent Indian policies indicate that India's engagement with Africa has shifted from the old issues of anti-colonialism, non-alignment and South-South co-operation to issues of trade and economy.

Ever since India's economic revival in the mid-nineties, India's foreign policy has been increasingly driven towards finding export markets, attracting foreign capital and know-how. This policy shift is echoed across Africa as most of the economies there are going through economic reforms and liberalisation. The Indian stand on the Western agricultural subsidies at the WTO negotiations has been in consonance with the views of most African nations.

The private sector's interest in Africa has spurred the government to link its diplomacy more explicitly to its economic requirements.

The recent improvement in India's economic relations with Africa, however, is not solely due to the Indian government's reinvigorated foreign policy. A key factor is the outward-looking attitude of India's private sector. Tempted by the easy availability of capital and driven by the search for new markets, Indian companies have been eagerly targeting African markets. The economic boom in India and the success of Indian companies in Europe and parts of South America have given businesses the confidence to venture into Africa.

Indian companies' increased activities in Africa have spurred the government to link its diplomacy in the continent more explicitly to its economic requirements. Thus the Indian engagement reflects the private-enterprise led bottom-up approach of its companies. India's commercial ties with Africa have grown as the India-Africa trade volume has

increased by 285 percent to US\$ 25 billion in the last four years.

People in African countries have a favourable view of India—in particular, on account of its democratic institutions and the manner of its economic growth. As a democratic developing country, India serves as a role model for Africans. It is also source of support in various grassroots sectors, especially agriculture, services and small- and medium-scale manufacturing. Above all, it is the new image of India—that of a leader in information technology, biotechnology and telecommunications—that has increased India's attractiveness.

For their part, African political leaders would like their constituencies to believe that India and Africa are making a joint effort to improve the well-being of their peoples and societies. It is here that India's real influence in Africa is likely to manifest itself—from its success in achieving sus-

tained economic growth and lifting many out of poverty in a democratic, multi-ethnic, post-colonial setting. For their part, Indian government officials would do well to remember that the right message to an external constituency in such an environment will be only delivered by a continued focus on domestic reforms.

India's leadership will be judged by its African partners on how well India tackles impediments to its economic growth in fields of infrastructure, education, labour and environment. To successfully engage Africa, therefore, it is imperative that India continues to demonstrate that it is addressing its own developmental challenges.

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ECONOMY

Pressed by inflation

Easing supply bottlenecks is the right way to go

GULZAR NATARAJAN

THE SPECTRE of inflation hangs over the global economy, causing alarm across the world's parliaments, central banks, board rooms and not least, kitchens. For the week ended March 29th, inflation in India had risen to a 40-month high of 7.41 percent, well above the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) self-imposed safety threshold of 5 percent. Coupled with recent weak industrial growth figures, this has raised the question of whether the high growth rates of recent years will be sustained.

The International Monetary Fund's (IMF) commodity price index shows that since 2005, food prices are up 65 percent, metal prices 70 percent, and petroleum products 175.7 percent. Over the past six years, the Goldman Sachs broad commodity index jumped by 288 percent, the energy price index by 358 percent, the non-energy index by 178 percent, the industrial metals index by 263 percent and the agricultural index by 220 percent.

The Indian government has responded with a slew of regulatory measures like imposing price controls, banning exports, increasing export duties on steel, lowering or scrapping import duties on rice and edible oils, and prohibiting futures trad-

ing in food-grains. These efforts are based on the futile assumption that it is possible to insulate the Indian economy from the global trend of rising prices. It fails to acknowledge that the rising prices are a result of global demand-supply mismatch and will persist till it is bridged. Beyond the political objective of appearing to be doing something, these measures will achieve little.

The current spurt in prices has been caused by a coincidence of factors that include the US consumption boom, burgeoning demand from emerging economies like India and China, poor harvests in major agricultural economies like Australia, diversion of farmland for bio-fuels, declining inventories, and falling agriculture investment. All countries have been affected and inflation is much higher in other developing countries. In China, it touched an 11-year high of 8.7 percent in February 2008. India has probably been spared the brunt of global inflation—a list of countries ranked by inflation finds India in the 79th place.

Regulatory controls and short-term supply side measures may ease inflationary pressures slightly, but cannot contain it when global prices are rising.

It is a moot point as to whether it is possible to contain inflationary pressures in India, even if the supply side constraints are removed and there is a domestic surplus. For example, despite surplus iron ore production, domestic prices have more than doubled in the past year. Measures like lowering import duties are likely to be offset by the producers in exporting countries raising their prices, capturing the benefits of the lower duties.

That demand side pressures are not driving inflation is clear from the fact that growth in money with the public has declined from an already moderate 17 percent to 14 percent in February 2008. RBI figures show that money supply which has been growing at 22.2 percent annually is slowing down to an estimated 21.2 percent. The rise in inflation is therefore more due to cost-push factors.

Addressing cost-push inflation with monetary policy levers like increases in interest rates and the Cash Reserve Ratio (CRR) will not yield results and may even backfire. Indian industry, especially the debt-dependent small-scale sector and the finance-driven consumer goods sector, is highly sensitive to interest rates. Any monetary tightening now will squeeze medium-term growth. Though higher interest rates will attract inflows of foreign exchange and make the rupee stronger and hence imports cheaper, they also have the potential to generate distortions like carry trade and costlier exports. In addition, the RBI's misplaced determination to maintain a weak rupee means that it will try to sterilize the inevitable inflows, worsening inflationary pressures.

The primary weapon against cost-push inflation is the easing of supply-side bottlenecks like stagnating agricultural production, declining private capital investments in manufacturing and over-stretched infrastructure. It is impossible for India to have inflation-free double digit growth rates without massive investments in its strained-to-seams infrastructure. Agricultural investments, both physical and those aimed at improving productivity, have been declining. This is manifested in the stagnating production, thereby forcing imports.

The major hope has to be that a recession in the United States and resultant drop in consumption will set in motion a chain of events that will bring down global aggregate demand. The reduced US demand will immediately translate into a lower demand for manufacturing imports from East Asia and China, and hence for many primary commodities and metals.

Further, beyond the inevitable secondary effects, fears of inflation adversely affecting eco-

nomie growth are largely misplaced. Investments in important sectors like infrastructure and real estate have been growing and show no signs of slackening. Corporate India's order books are overflowing, with orders more than doubling between the second and fourth quarter of 2007-08. In fact, the already committed investments and the projected expenditures in these sectors should provide more than adequate demand to sustain high growth.

The rise in prices of consumer durables and non-durables is likely to have limited impact on demand. In a large, nascent and fast growing consumer market like India, the demand for such products exhibit inelastic characteristics. The consumer base, especially in the villages and small towns, is expanding faster than the supply, and more than off-sets any fall in demand due to high prices. Consumers have also become more value-conscious and less price-sensitive in the rapidly expanding mid-priced segment and above. The Sixth Pay Commission largesse, expected to be nearly Rs 350 billion and the fiscal concessions given in the recent budget will put more money in the hands of consumers and thereby increase aggregate demand.

A 7-7.5 percent GDP growth rate is a very good deal, especially at a time of such tumult in the global economy. Given India's severe supply-side constraints and infrastructure bottlenecks, sustaining a growth rate of over 9 percent was impossible without stoking inflation. This slight slowdown will help prevent over-heating and the consequent further build up of inflationary pressures.

It is just as well that we are doing away with the weekly WPI-based inflation figures, that only fueled the scare mongering that grips the media regularly. No major economy publishes weekly inflation figures. A distinction also needs to be made between headline and core inflation, which controls for the large fluctuations in specific commodities.

Such times are a strong reminder of the continuing need to maintain a robust and effective public distribution system and a social safety net that will help to insulate the poorest of the poor from economic volatility. It is also a reiteration of the importance of food security and the need to make investments in agriculture to increase productivity.

Gulzar Natarajan is a civil servant.

REVIEW



Photo: Ragib Hasan

Memories of 1971

Life in the time of genocide, war and liberation

AMARDEEP SINGH

TAHMIMA ANAM'S *A Golden Age* is a very strong first novel, written in a direct, natural style and is the first novel put out by a major Western publisher with Bangladesh's war for independence as its main theme. And for that reason alone, *A Golden Age* will become the kind of book that is often taught in college classes on "South Asian Literature". The novelist Sorayya Khan did publish a novel called *Noor* on the subject of the 1971 war, but Ms Khan's novel was released on a small, niche press, and did not garner a wide readership. Among major novelists, the 1971 war has not been covered in depth. The war is important in Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey*, but only at a great distance (Mr Mistry's novel is set in Bombay). And a section of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* deals with this event, but it

Review

A Golden Age: A Novel

by Tahmima Anam
Harper, 288 pages, 2008

comes near the end of the text, and Mr Rushdie addresses it in rather lyrical terms—one doesn't really get a solid explanation of how the war started or what it was about.

Here, we do. The centre of the novel is, of course, the family drama—involving a

widow named Rehana and her two grown children, Sohail and Maya. Both of the children are politically oriented, and take a strongly pro-Bangla, pro-Sheikh Mujib position on the events that transpired in 1971.

By contrast, their mother Rehana is at first reluctant to make a commitment—though the needs of her children soon force her to inject herself into the conflict. She also begins to come out of her shell emotionally, which is of course what most readers want to see.

Here is an early passage in *A Golden Age*, one of the first direct discussions of the political situation:

He'll never make a good husband, she heard Mrs Chowdhury say. Too much politics.

The comment had stung because it was probably true. Lately the children had little time for anything but the struggle. It had started when Sohail entered the university. Ever since '48, the Pakistani authorities had ruled the eastern wing of the country like a colony. First they tried to force everyone to speak Urdu instead of Bengali. They took the jute money from Bengal and spent it on factories in Karachi and Islamabad. One general after another made promises they had no intention of keeping. The Dhaka University students had been involved in the protests from the very beginning, so it was no surprise Sohail had got caught up, and Maya too. Even Rehana could see the logic; what sense did it make to have a country in two halves, poised on either side of India like a pair of horns?

But in 1970, when the cyclone hit, it was as though everything came into focus. Rehana remembered the day Sohail and Maya had returned from the rescue operation: the red in their eyes as they told her how they had waited for the food trucks to come and watched as the water rose and the bodies washed up on the shore; how they had realized, with mounting panic, that the food would wouldn't come because it had never been sent.

The next day Maya had joined the Communist Party.

Clearly from the above, one can see that Ms Anam sees the war of liberation firmly from a Bangladeshi perspective, where the Pakistani Army is the villain. (It is hard to disagree: General Yahya Khan is thought to have said, "Kill three million of them, and the rest will be eating out of our hands") Operation Searchlight—the brutal military campaign aimed at suppressing the rebellious Bengalis—is described, as are the attacks on East Pakistani Hindus. The Indian intervention is seen as a positive development, preventing what might have turned into an all-out genocidal suppression. (Estimates on the number of Bangladeshis killed by the Pakistani army in 1971 vary—from 200,000 to 3,000,000—so it seems perfectly fair to suggest, as Ms Anam does at one point, that

Operation Searchlight was itself an act of genocide against the Bangladeshi people.)

Though she is undoubtedly a Bangladeshi partisan, Ms Anam treats the gruesome acts of the war from a respectful distance; the story is told primarily from Rehana's point of view, and as a non-combatant she wouldn't have seen acts of torture or rape first-hand (though she does certainly encounter the results of those barbarities). Here Mr Anam made the right choice. Extensively documenting the details of what the Pakistani army did in fact do that year would have overwhelmed the novel—and that kind of documentation is, anyway, the job of a historian. One shouldn't think of *A Golden Age* as some kind of definitive account of 1971, but rather as an accessible, novelistic introduction to that story.

One finds some Bengali literary culture alluded to in Ms Anam's novel, but not a huge amount. There are references to *Sultana's Dream* and the songs of Tagore, but not Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay, Saratchandra Chatterjee, or Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. But then, though their children study in the university, the Haque family is not really a literary family, so extended discourse on the Bengali Renaissance would be out of place.

Friends of this reviewer also found *A Golden Age* to be a satisfying read, though some did wonder whether there might be some points of culinary inaccuracy regarding the Bengali dishes described in the novel. For instance, is it likely that an upper middle-class Bangladeshi family would eat a meal of roast lamb, as the Haque family do early in the book, before the war starts? In a recent internet discussion of the novel, some readers speculated that the choice of this particular dish might reflect a "Raj holdover" tendency in the cultural milieu in which *A Golden Age* is set, which may be true. Others felt roast mutton was a more likely dish. In any case, Ms Anam's book is particularly rich with references to Bengali cuisine, which is described using the original Bengali terms, rather than their English translations.

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